

A YA RDZI HERDING WOMAN'S EARLY LIFE

Blo bzang ལྷོ་བཟང་།

ABSTRACT

Blo bzang describes his mother's (Dkar mo rgyal, b. 1962) early life in an A mdo Tibetan herding community presently (2018) located in Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Village, Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Township, Ya rdzi, Zhon hwa (Xunhua) Salar Autonomous Country, Mtsho shar (Haidong) City, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

KEYWORDS

A mdo Tibetan women, Mtsho sngon, Qinghai, Tibetan biography

Dkar mo rgyal carries her granddaughter during the time of her youngest son's wedding on the summer pasture of Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Village, Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Township, Ya rdzi (Xunhua) Salar Autonomous County, Mtsho shar (Haidong) City, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China (summer 2017, Blo bzang.).



I am Blo bzang (b. 1989) from Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Village, Rkang tsha (Gangcha) Township, Ya rdzi (Xunhua) Salar Autonomous Country, Mtsho shar (Haidong) City, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. This story is about my mother, Dkar mo rgyal (b. 1962). Mkha're is her short name. I recorded her life experiences in August 2017 when I was at home. I present her early life in this text and write it in the first person.

That night, my grandmother, Klu mo sgyid (1920-2007), hurried to help my mother, Klu mo tshe ring (b. 1945), who lay on a yak-skin cushion in the right side of the tent. She took deep breaths. In the light of an oil lamp, I could see that she was sweating. Later, my father, Dkon mchog nyi ma (b. 1944), took me in his sheepskin robe pouch to the tent of our neighbor, A pha bstan dar. I slept with Father there but, I missed Grandmother.

The next morning, I saw Mother holding a baby in her arms. The baby didn't open her eyes.

That morning, Father chanted scriptures more loudly than usual, while he sat in his normal place to the left of the stove, in the left part of the tent. Maybe he was happy with the arrival of his second daughter, Bsod nams sgyid. I was not interested in the baby, my first sister. I was only interested in my dear grandmother.

Grandmother took constant care of me. I loved it when she carried me. One sunny day, she carried me up some hills as she was herding yaks. We ate *zho brdzis* 'roasted barley flour mixed with yogurt' for lunch. I drank milk from my *nu khug* 'small lamb-stomach bag'. Grandmother drank nothing, she just ate *zho brdzis* with the other local herders, who were all very talkative.

When it was only Grandmother and me, she sang. When she drove our yaks back home, she sang *ma Ni* songs. I listened and slept. When I woke up, it was already dark, and I was still on her back. She busily tied the yaks in the pen.

I woke up because I had to pee. In fact, I had peed several times in her robe that day. Grandmother had carried me the whole day. She took me into the tent, and cleaned her robe, and me. She poured milk into my *nu khug*, and then took a milk pail and returned to the yak pen to milk. I nursed my *nu khug* and didn't look at my little sister, even when she was crying.

Three months later, Grandmother, Mother, and some neighbor-women made felt by a river. I played nearby. I suddenly remembered my little sister, whom I had not seen for several days. I went to Grandmother, put my arms around her neck, and asked, "A ma klu mkho<sup>1</sup> 'Grandmother', where is our *lo lo* 'baby'?"

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<sup>1</sup> A ma = mother. She often called her grandmother "A ma klu mkho'.

She said, "We gave your little sister to Uncle Skybs de."

Uncle Skyabs de was Mother's older brother. He had married when he was fourteen and his wife was thirteen. They had no children. My little sister became their *bu skal ma* 'step-daughter' when she was three months old, and I was five years old. I rarely saw her after that.

Father and Mother then drove our sheep to where there was more grass and didn't return for several months. Meanwhile, Grandmother and I lived in our big tent, in a small valley, and took care of our yaks. I had no playmates.

One afternoon, I played with my stone toys outside of our tent. When I grew tired of playing, I went inside the tent and asked Grandmother for some *rtsam pa*. She gave me a little. After I had eaten it, I asked her for some milk. She poured some for me. Grandmother never refused my requests. I drank the milk. It tasted different. I stopped drinking it and asked Grandmother for some bread. She said, "The bread is all finished, but soon I'll make more, and give you a fresh piece."

I cried and cried. Grandmother held me and tried to stop me from crying, but I didn't. Finally, she took a piece of candy from a *mar sgam* 'wooden box usually containing butter,' put it in her mouth, and then spit it into my mouth. It was so sweet and delicious that I stopped crying. Usually, when I was bothered, she told me folktales, made jokes, sang, and taught me *ma Ni* songs. That afternoon, after I finished the candy, she taught *ma Ni* songs. Here are some of the songs she sang:

#### Song One

འགོ་རྒྱལ་པ་དང་མཐོ།  
 གློ་ཕན་གློ་ཕན་གློ་ཕན།  
 'gro drug pha dang ma'o  
 drin can drin gzo gyis ang

ཨོ་མ་ཐི་པད་མེ་མེ།  
 ཨོ་མ་ཐི་པད་མེ་མེ།  
 བྱམས་པ་ཕྱུགས་མང་དགའ།  
 དག་གཉིས་ཀུན་ལ་ཕྱུགས་ཨང།

byams pa phyogs med dka'o  
dgra gnyen kun la sgoms ang

ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།  
ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།

### Song Two

མགོན་ཐུགས་རྗེ་ཆེ་མངའ་བླ་མ་དང་།  
སྒྲ་བདེ་ཆེན་གཏེར་མཛོད་ཉི་རྒྱ་།  
བདག་མེས་པའི་བྱ་ཡི་ལམ་སྒྲ་རྒྱངས།  
mgon thugs rje che mnga' bla ma dang  
lha bde chen gter mdzod he ru ka  
bdag mos pa'i bu yi lam sna drongs

ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།  
ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།  
ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།

ཆེ་འདི་ཕྱི་འི་འདུན་མ་བྱེད་རང་མཁྱེན།  
སྒྲོན་རྒྱུ་དཀར་བསོད་ནམས་བསམགས་པའི་མཐུས།  
རྟེན་དལ་འབྱུར་ཆར་བའི་མི་ལུས་ཐོབ།  
tshe 'di phyi'i 'dun ma khyed rang mkhyen  
sngon rnam dkar bsod nams bsags pa'i mthus  
rten dal 'byor tshang ba'i mi lus thob

ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།  
ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།  
ཨྱ་མཾ་ཐི་པད་མེ་སྒྱུ།

### Song Three

མགོན་ཁྱེད་སྐུ་དང་བཅས་པའི་ཐུགས་རྗེ་དང་།  
བདག་གིས་དགེ་བའི་སྤྱོད་བསམགས་པའི་མཐུས།  
འདི་ནས་འཕྲོས་ཆོ་རྒྱལ་པས་བསམགས་པའི་ཞིང་།  
དགའ་ལྡན་གནས་སུ་རྒྱས་ཏེ་སྤྱེ་བར་ཤོག།

mgon khyod sras dang bcas ba'i thugs rje dang  
 bdag gis dge ba ji snyid bsags pa'i mthus  
 'di nas 'phos tshe rgyal pas bsngags pa'i zhing  
 dga' ldan gnas su rdzus te skye bar shog

ཨྲ་མ་རི་པད་མེ་ནི།  
 ཨྲ་མ་རི་པད་མེ་ནི།  
 ཨྲ་མ་རི་པད་མེ་ནི།  
 ཨྲ་མ་རི་པད་མེ་ནི།

I was so happy when I first saw my second sister, Sgrol ma skyid. I wanted to play with her, but she couldn't play with me, because she was only two months old so I prepared some toys for when she was older.

One early winter morning, I ran out of our tent wearing nothing, not even shoes, to chase some partridges running near our tent. I followed them up a hill behind our tent. When I reached the top of the hill, I had lost the partridges. I was very sad. Empty-handed, I returned home, cold and tired. I was so cold that I cried. Grandmother came, and held me in her robe, and asked me to hold her body, warming me quickly. My foot was so cold that it hurt when it was warmed.

The next morning, I went to chase the partridges again, this time throwing stones at them. My stones hit two partridges, and they fell to the ground. I delightedly hurried to get them. They were dead. I was unhappy that I couldn't catch them alive. When I took them home, Grandmother was both surprised and upset.

She said, "Mkha' re, don't kill partridges! They are mothers, what about their babies?"

I never chased partridges again.

That afternoon, a guest came to our home to drink Grandmother's milk tea. Everyone in the tribe said that her milk tea was delicious, and she was famous for it.

Grandmother prepared milk tea for the guest, while Mother took care of Sister. I played in the tent, and asked the guest to lift me up, so I could hold a rope tied to the top of the tent. I held that rope and swung back and forth. He helped me two times and then stopped because he was afraid I would fall and injure myself. I then piled up

some robes, and a wool quilt on the ground, and caught the rope. I did this again and again. Swinging was so much fun! As our guest drank milk tea, he watched me. As he was leaving, he said something to Grandmother. Later, when I asked her what he had said, she replied, "He said you needed to learn how to behave properly."

That evening, Mother reported that several sheep were missing. After Grandmother mentioned that Father would come home the next day, they decided that when Father returned, they would then search for the missing sheep.

The next day, as Grandmother and Mother waited for Father, I climbed the hill behind our home to watch for Father's arrival. I couldn't wait to play *the ge* 'sheep-leg bones game'. Father didn't come that day.

Early the next morning, Grandmother said that Father had arrived. I ran outside the tent and saw Father in the yak pen with three loaded yaks. When he had left home, he had put beef, mutton, and butter on the yaks and had gone to Bis mdo (Wendu), an agricultural area, to trade for grain. Our family had many friends there. This time, as usual, Father brought back a lot of grain, wheat flour, barley, bean flour, tea leaves, oil, and some bread. The bread was really delicious, and my favorite food. Father entered the tent and we began to have breakfast.

Grandmother asked, "Nyi ma, what happened to you? I thought you would arrive yesterday."

"I couldn't come during the daytime because I was afraid someone would see me, so I traveled at night, and rested during the daytime," he answered.<sup>1</sup> After breakfast, Father said that he was tired, and left to rest.

When he woke up that afternoon, I asked him to play *the ge*. He agreed, but said, "If I defeat you, I'll punish you." When we started to play, we took twenty *the ge* and divided them into groups of ten *the ge* each. One group was Father's and the other group was mine. We threw the *the ge* on the floor and checked to see which group had more horses. Each side of the *the ge* has a different animal name. The *the*

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<sup>1</sup> If someone saw him and informed government officials, they would punish him or a family member.

*ge*'s top is a "sheep," the bottom is a "goat," the left side is a "horse," and the right side is a "donkey." The front side is a "lion," and the rear is an "elephant." The master of the group with the most horses plays first.

There were three horses in my group. Father's group had only two horses so I played first. Father also had to give me ten of his *the ge*. I mixed them with my *the ge* and then I threw them on the floor. There were now twenty *the ge* on the floor. Some were sheep, some were goats, some were horses, and some were donkeys. It was very difficult to have a lion or an elephant, because the lion or elephant side had to be on top. Fortunately, I had an elephant. If you had an elephant you could exchange it for a sheep, goat, horse, or donkey. When you changed an elephant for an animal, you had to use your nose to touch the side of the *the ge* indicating the animal of the *the ge* you wanted. You were not allowed to use your hands. I changed my elephant for a horse, because a horse was near my elephant.

Actually, I wasn't a very skillful player.

I started to play. First, I hit a sheep with one of my sheep, picked it up, and saved it. Next, I hit a goat with one of my goats. Third, I hit a donkey with one of my donkeys, but I failed because my donkey hit a sheep, which broke the rules and I lost the chance to continue playing. I thus got two *the ge* the first time I played.

Father then threw his *the ge* on the floor. He was a very good player, rarely made any mistakes, and got most of the *the ge*. During this game, I got only two *the ge*, while Father won with eighteen.

We played a second time. This time, I got eleven *the ge* and Father got nine.

We played several times, and I won many of them. I was very happy and excited to win, even though I knew Father was letting me win. That was a big reason I loved playing with Father.

Later, Mother came home from driving our sheep, and told Father about the missing sheep. Father searched for our missing sheep for several days, but he never found them.

Over the years, men held many meetings in our community about protecting the grassland, changing pastures, and government announcements. One day, Father came back from a government meeting and said, "The government announced that we must send our



children who are seven and older to school. If we don't, the government will punish us."

I was eight years old.

One early morning, Father took me to school on horseback. I thought the school building was the most beautiful building I had ever seen. The classrooms were made of adobe walls with wood paneling. The ceiling and poles had many colorful drawings of flowers, and other objects I did not recognize. This beautiful school greatly attracted me. Later, I learned that the building was a former monastery. We had lunch at school and then returned home that afternoon.

I had twenty-two classmates and two teachers. One taught math, and one taught Chinese. They were both Tibetan.

Our math teacher was kind, and never scolded us, even if we didn't understand what he was teaching. However, our Chinese language teacher was very strict. When he was angry, he scolded us, calling us "animals." We adopted this, and scolded each other using "animal," though we didn't know what "animal" meant.

We had two Chinese books, one about Chinese phonetics, and the other was Chairman Mao's writings. In our first Chinese class, the teacher entered and told us to open Chairman Mao's book. He read some sentences and told us to repeat them, and we did so, both carefully and loudly. He walked over to me and asked, "Do you walk on your feet or on your head?"

"I don't know," I answered, puzzled.

He struck my shoulder and said I was holding my book upside down. I didn't know I was holding it that way, I just knew I was holding a book. He then ordered me to stand outside the classroom until lunchtime.

On the way home, the boys fought with each other. Sometimes, the girls fought with the boys, but girls never fought with other girls. Our class only had four girls, and we helped each other when the boys bullied us.

One afternoon, we fought terribly. We three girls walked home together, and the boys scolded us, saying, "Female dog! Female fox!"

We yelled back, calling them, "Male wolf!" There were seven boys, and they ran at us. Two boys came to beat me, but they couldn't knock me down. Then a boy took some wet yak dung, and forced it into

my mouth, so I bit his finger hard. He immediately held his finger, and I saw blood on his hands. I escaped, and ran away, and saw Ri lo also escape. Mkha' 'gro mtsho, was taller than all the boys, and twice as strong. As we ran, the boys chased us, and threw stones at us. Mkha' 'agro mtsho threw a big stone back at them, which hit a boy in the head. He fell and we heard him crying. We didn't look back and ran more quickly.

When I got home, I told Grandmother, who stopped me from attending school for a month.

When I next went to school, I found some of my former classmates were absent, but my friend, Mkha' 'agro mtsho, was still there. That morning, Grandmother had given me three *yuan*, and told me to buy candy for her. After class, Ri lo, Mkha' 'agro mtsho, and I went to a shop and bought three *yuan* of candy, filling a cloth bag. I would attend school for several days, and then stop for a month or more. I attended school off and on for a total of eight years.

When I was sixteen, it was time to attend the township school, but Father told the government officials that I was very ill so I never had to go.

That same year, the government gave me my own livestock - two female yaks. The milk, butter, and cheese from the two female yaks belonged to me, and I didn't need to give any of it to the government officials. I was delighted, and sometimes teased my sister, Sgrol ma skyid, by saying, "I have my own female yaks. I can drink milk, and eat *rtsam pa* with plenty of butter, while you don't have any."

She would cry and call Father. Then I would say I was joking, and I would promise to give her all my milk and butter. This made her stop crying. Later, I would say it again, she would again cry and call Father, and I would repeat what I had said before. I made Sister cry several times a day. I thought it was funny to make her cry, and then stop crying.

I had a third sister, Sha bo sgrol ma. When she was three years old, Mother's older sister took her to her home, because she had only one daughter of her own. Mother cried because she missed Sha bo sgrol ma. I lost Third Sister, but I had a little brother, my parent's fifth child.

By this time, I no longer bullied Sister, and started to help our family. Sister Sgrol ma skyid herded the sheep, and I took care of our yaks.

Sister and I usually slept with Grandmother, who told us interesting folktales and riddles. Every evening we listened to her. One evening, she mentioned my grandfather, who I never saw. When I asked her about Grandfather, she said:

I married him when I was seventeen, and he was twenty. After a year, we had our first child, Dkon mchog nyi ma, your father. Your grandfather often did terrible things in our community, and in other places, too. He wouldn't come home for several days, and sometimes for several months. When he did return, he would bring many things for us, even leopard, otter, and fox skins. He once brought me a beautiful coral necklace - the one your mother wears now.

He loved our son, our only child, more than me. He would bring home cloth and sew our son clothes himself. One day, some of his friends came to our home, and discussed going somewhere. The next day, he left with them. I didn't know where they had gone, but I believed that one day, he would return home.

A month later, I heard that he had been killed, but I didn't believe it. I had heard such gossip several times before, as he was a real troublemaker. Finally, he returned home very happily. All his friends had returned home earlier, after a fight with Ma Bufang's soldiers in Reb gong. They gave me your grandfather's rifle, sword, and amulet. I accepted what they gave to me, but in my heart, I waited for his return. I took care of the family. I took special care of our son, especially your father, who was only six years old then.

I met many difficulties. I really worried when some monks and laymen came to our village looking for seven-year-old boys. They said they were looking for their *bla ma*'s reincarnation. They came to my home and asked many questions about my son. I answered their questions, but finally I said, "I know my son, and he isn't a holy *bla ma*'s reincarnation, he is a normal child," but they still took his name. Several days later, I heard that they had chosen three boys, and one was their *bla ma*'s reincarnation. My son was one of the three. I worried that if they took my son, I would

have nothing. After a month, they identified their *bla ma*'s reincarnation, and I was very glad that it wasn't my son.

Grandmother also told us her own stories. Many were very humorous. I listened to Grandmother's stories for twenty years.

When I was twenty-one years old, my parents told me that a family had asked me to be their daughter-in-law. I agreed.

One summer day, my parents held a very big wedding for me, and then I moved to my husband's home. I really missed Grandmother, and my parents, but the days passed quickly.

A year later, I had our first child, a daughter.

Some years later, my husband became a doctor, and had a government job in our home township. He was responsible for our family and children. I have five children, two daughters, and three sons, and have never worried about food and clothes for our children.

#### NON-ENGLISH TERMS

a ma klu mkho ཨ་མ་ཀླུ་མ་ཁོ།

a pha bstan dar ཨ་ཕ་བསྐྱེན་དར།

bis mdo བིས་མདོ།

bla ma བླ་མ།

blo bzang བློ་བཟང་།

bsod nams sgyid བསོད་ནམས་སྟིང་།

bu skal ma བུ་སྐལ་མ།

Chairman Mao, Mao zhu xi 毛主席

dkar mo rgyal དཀར་མོ་རྒྱལ།

dkon mchog nyi ma དཀོན་མཆོག་ཉི་མ།

Gangcha 岗察

Haidong 海东

klu mo sgyid ཀླུ་མོ་སྟིང་།

klu mo tshe ring ཀླུ་མོ་ཚེ་རིང་།

lo lo ལོ་ལོ།

Ma Bufang 马步芳

ma Ni མ་ནི།

mar sgam མར་སྐམ།

mkha' 'gro mtsho མཁའ་གྲོ་མཚོ།

mkha' re མཁའ་རེ།

mtsho shar མཚོ་ཤར།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།

nu khug ལུ་ཁུག།

nyi ma ཉི་མ།

Qinghai 青海

reb gong རེབ་གོང།

ri lo རི་ལོ།

rkang tsha ཀང་ཇ།

rtsam pa རུས་པ།

Salar, Sala 撒拉

sgrol ma skyid སྒྲོལ་མ་སྒྱིད།

sha bo sgrol ma ཤ་བོ་སྒྲོལ་མ།

skyabs de སྐྱམས་དེ།

the ge ཐེ་གེ།

Wendu 文都

Xunhua 循化

ya rdzi ཡ་རུ་རྩི།

zho brdzis ཞོ་བརྩིས།

zhon hwa ཞོན་འཁྲ།